DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 058 CS 210 371

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TITLE Confidence vs. Authority: Visions of the Writer in Rhetorical Theory.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; Classroom Environment; Educational Practices; Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Rhetorical Invention; Student Attitudes; Student Role; Student Writing Models; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; Textbook Content; *Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Apprehension; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness; *Rhetorical Theory

ABSTRACT

By building up the confidence of student writers, writing teachers hope to reduce the hostility and anxiety so often found in authoritarian introductory college composition classes. Process oriented writing theory implicitly defines confidence as a wholly personal quality resulting from students' discovery that they do have "something to say" to readers. However, the social dimension of the writing act is lost in such a formulation. The text's authority derives from the writer's imagination, but it does so because the writers have a privileged relationship with the world, a relationship that gives them access to and influence with an audience. But this does not hold true for student writers in writing classrooms, where students consider the teacher the owner of their writing. Writing teachers wish the students to be creative but within the limits of a specified writing assignment, due date, and topic. The current crop of writing textbooks adds to the conflict by either glorifying the ability to write or by reducing it to a physical skill anyone can learn (like skiing). Peer group revision, journal writing, portfolios of student writing samples, and revision after turning in the paper are all methods that build personal confidence and social authority--all help dilute the concentration of authority in the teacher and give students a stake in what goes on both in the classroom and in their own writing. (NKA)

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Confidence vs. Authority: Visions of the Writer in Rhetorical Theory.

Virginia Perdue

One important change that the current process theory of writing has produced among writing teachers has been a new set of teaching priorities. In most college writing classrooms, the old emphasis on learning the rules of grammar has been replaced by a concern for developing the confidence, as well as the competence, of our student writers. Writing teachers want to show students that they already know quite a bit about language, thanks to their speech competence, so that learning to write is not really so mysterious. In this way, teachers hope to reduce the hostility and anxiety so often found in introductory college composition classes.

Despite these good intentions, students still ask "What do you want me to write?" It is probably one of the most frustrating questions students ask writing teachers. To me, the question used to indicate that my students had not been listening. I would respond, "What I want isn't important; what do you want to write?" And if the student were honest, she would say, "Nothing, but you gave the assignment, so I have to write it, and I want an A, so what do you want me to write?"

Until recently, I blamed the mercenary souls of my students for that question, along with the reality of the unequal relationship between my students and me. My students

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were right, after all: I gave the assignments, and they carried them out. However, lately, another view made possible by writers like Paulo Freire, Richard Ohmann, Ira Shor, and Michel Foucault portrays this irritating question as just about the only intelligent response to a host of conflicts that gets played out in most composition courses.

Within that exchange between my student and me lurk two important but unacknowledged conflicts: the assertive role of the author vs. both the passive role of the student and the authoritative role of the teacher. We are all familiar with the traditional classroom relationship in which the teacher dispenses knowledge and the students passively receive it. It is a seemingly natural and necessary arrangement in the learning process--and no less so in learning to write, where students must learn the conventions of formal writing. However, the passivity traditionally expected of students contradicts the assertive, active role that an author assumes in the act of writing, where the writer generates, chooses, and shapes material to communicate to an audience. In the classroom, writing teachers want to help students assume this kind of control over their writing by building their confidence in themselves as writers; yet, they do so at the very same time that they give the assignments and grade the results, thereby invoking their students' passive role.

Essentially then, writing teachers undercut their goal

by opposing to students' development of personal confidence their greater, institutionally-based authority as teachers. However, teachers do not intentionally set up this opposition. Rather, it arises out of long-accepted assumptions about the nature of writers and writing that operate in college writing classrooms. As Michel Foucault points out in The Archaeology of Knowledge, the very familiarity of these assumptions and practices gives them their power: people don't question what they don't see. So, when students and teachers encounter this opposition between the role of writer and the role of student, they do not recognize it for anything other than a puzzling necessity to be accepted. Both teachers and students can examine, even challenge, this contradiction, however, and a start is to examine the theoretical assumptions that inform the goal of developing students' confidence.

A key assumption is the portrayal of the "author" within rhetorical theory as a unique, individual source of meaning. Process oriented writing theory, for example, implicitly defines confidence as a wholly personal quality resulting from students' discovery that they do have "something to say" to readers. The source of this "something to say" is imagination, because the imagination provides a unique perspective from which the writer generates ideas to write about. According to process theory, this unique perspective

gives writers and their writing the ability to affect a reader. Thus, teaching students how to coax ideas from their imaginations will increase their confidence and improve their writing.

This formulation fails to recognize that confidence also has a social dimension: the authority derived from a given position in an institution or a society. That failure is due to the process-oriented view of writing as a lonely, individual act of creation, in which the writer retrieves an idea from imagination and wrestles it onto that pristine white page. This notion denies the social dimensions of the writing act--of what it means to be a writer in late twentieth century America. In its concentration on discovering "something to say," process theory tacitly presumes that writing is a customary channel through which to say things, that some publishing mechanism exists which will get the writing out, and that an audience exists who will read (rather than grade or throw away) what the writer has written. The text's authority does derive from the writer's imagination, but it does so because the writer has a privileged relationship with the world, a relationship which gives him or her access to and influence with an audience. Richard Ohmann notes in "Reflections on Class and Language" that all speakers are located within specific relations of social authority:

> Whenever we talk we do so within a nexus of power, status, intimacy, family roles, institutional roles, designs on one another, and so on (12).

The same holds true for writing, despite the physical distance between reader and writer.

In its focus on the individual, however, process theory ignores the fact that student writers do not have a privileged relationship with the world or readers, particularly not in writing classrooms. So, when composition teachers ask students to derive their confidence as writers exclusively from a unique, creative, "inner" self, they unintentionally invoke the conflict. Students are not sure they have such a creative inner self, and if they do have one, its efforts are likely to be graded down. It is certainly not to be trusted.

In response, students resolve the conflict by behaving like students, not writers. Usually, if our students have anything to say, it is that they <u>don't</u> have anything to say; that even if they did, they wouldn't write it in an essay, and that the people who would be interested wouldn't go to an essay to read it. They know that no publishing mechanism exists, making the teacher their only reader; and of course, the teacher's thinking is highly unlikely to be changed by anything they have to write. Students don't own their writing; teachers do.

As a result, students may hear our theory, but they

listen to our practice. Writing teachers say, "Be creative!" But do so within the limits of this writing assignment, by that due date, on this topic, typed double-spaced for easier grading. They ask students to open up their minds, but only within certain, specified limits. True, professional writers are subject to the same demands by editors and publishers, but they already have achieved the social authority not to be intimidated by them. In restricting student-writers' source of confidence to the personal realm, writing teachers inadvertently prevent them from gaining the necessary authority to function as writers; for to exercise that authority would disrupt the traditional student-teacher relationship.

This description does not mean to portray writing teachers as dictators. Most writing teachers honestly want to help their students, not confuse or oppress them. But process theory's concentration on the individual imagination prevents students and teachers alike from recognizing the source of these conflicts in long held assumptions and seemingly innocuous daily classroom practices. Writing textbooks provide more examples of just how subtly these practices distribute authority to teachers and away from students.

One function of the current crop of writing textbooks is to motivate students to want to write. Two typical arguments

that textbook authors use to motivate students are 1) writing can provide a kind of therapy, and 2) writing is no harder to learn than swimming or cooking. The first argument glorifies the ability to write, while the second reduces and simplifies the process.

In a number of writing textbooks, authors often recommend writing to students as a way to "work through fear," "conquer confusion," and "cope with anxiety." Their intention, of course, is to describe the personal benefits that writing offers students, that it is not merely a useful tool for communication, but a way to explore one's inner self. However, the metaphor backfires, for it portrays the student as an anxious, insecure patient who depends on the teacher-therapist to 'prescribe' writing as therapy in order to achieve psychological health. This metaphor assumes that the student has an internal disorder which the teacher has the power and knowledge to 'cure.' In this transaction, the teacher decides when the student has achieved a state of health, while the student, of course, must follow directions in order to 'recover,' because the alternative is failure--not just of learning to write, but of achieving mental health.

This metaphor allows textbook authors to reinforce the teacher's authority while placing the burden of failure on the student. The medical metaphor suggests that if writing

competently provides so many emotional rewards, then not writing restricts students to a narrow, limited, confusing world, where thinking is illogical, communication is unclear, and personal uniqueness is buried. By implication, this is the world which students inhabit since they do not know how to write. Thus, ever so subtly, the textbooks imply that success at learning to write will come from obeying the teacher-therapist's prescriptions, while failure will come from willful disobedience or personal inadequacy. The teacher is responsible for success, while the student is responsible for failure.

Another metaphor used in these books is one familiar to writing teachers: writing as physical skill. Textbook authors intend to reduce the level of threat that writing poses for students by comparing it to an activity students may have already learned: cooking, swimming, skiing and playing piano are most frequently used. One basic writing textbook, for example, invites students to think about writing as skiing and describes the automatic increase in comfort and skill that people feel as they gain competence:

> Though most people do not become hot doggers, they do, after they master the various aspects of the sport, become good enough to enjoy the thrill of swiftly moving down a splendid, snow covered slope. . . . Writing is not so different from skiing. It, too does not feel natural in the beginning, but once you grasp the various aspects of the process, writing can feel natural as a method of

expressing ideas (Carol Schoen et al, The Writing Experience, 2nd ed., p. xii).

The point that authors--and teachers--want students to hear is that the difficulty in learning to write lies in its strangeness to students, and that by listening to the teacher-coach, the strangeness and the difficulty will automatically resolve themselves. However, this analogy reinforces the denial of the social dimension of writing. Beneath it is a continued emphasis on the student's development of an autonomous writing self. These physical activities are solitary pursuits, celebrating the free, creative, self reliant individual, a point which the physical basis of the metaphor tends to obscure. Yet, for students who have not yet achieved that autonomy, writing as skill represents the classic Catch-22 conflict: writing requires of students the very autonomy which it is supposed to develop, but which both the medical and skill metaphors have just denied them.

If writing teachers recognize these metaphors offered by our textbooks, along with traditional classroom practices, as methods for simultaneously encouraging confidence yet undermining the development of authority in our student-writers, they can begin to counter that contradiction with practices that will build in students both personal confidence and social authority. Ira Shor calls this process "the withering away of the teacher" (Critical Teaching and

Everyday Life 98).

Many methods are already being used in writing classrooms: peer groups for revising allow students to share their writing with each other before the teacher sees it; revision opportunities after turning in the paper teach students that writing is not finished when the teacher grades it; journals allow students to explore a range of writing styles without fear of a penalty; portfolios of student writing samples give students some control over what the teacher sees (after all, professional writers are not forced to turn in everything they write to their editors). All these ways help to dilute the concentration of authority in the teacher and give students a stake in what goes on in both the classroom and in their own writing. And they do so in precisely the ordinary, innocuous ways that traditional classroom practices use to distribute authority.

Yet, these practices do not automatically guarantee some egalitarian utopia; after all, they already operate in many classrooms where authority remains vested in the instructor. We must recognize that students and teachers alike bring their social position to the classroom, and that the classroom itself operates within the very educational and social systems that have formed their identities and shaped their imaginations. So, students and teachers alike must consciously examine the daily experiences that have placed

them where they are in the social matrix. The classroom can operate as a place where teachers and students can study these experiences, not as manifestations of their unique identities, but as instances of how society and self affect each other.

In order to conduct such an examination, teachers and students must behave differently in the classroom. The egalitarian practices mentioned earlier can begin to accomplish this change in behavior, but they must be seen as ways to promote the study of self-in-society and society-in-self, not as ends in themselves. Perhaps the most important step, though, is for teachers. In order to initiate this process, it is up to us as teachers of writing to investigate the theoretical and ideological assumptions which inform current classroom practice and textbook advice. We particularly need to re-examine traditional assumptions about what it means to be a writer, a teacher, and a student in college writing classrooms. Writing teachers must begin to recognize that, as Michel Foucault puts it:

> . . . to speak is to do something other than to express what one thinks; . . . to add a statement to a pre-existing series of statements is to perform a complicated and costly gesture . . . ; a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose 'new ideas', a little invention and creativity, a different mentality, but transformations in a practice. . . . I have not denied--far from it--the possibility of changing discourse: I have deprived the

> sovereignty of the subject [individual] the exclusive and instantaneous right to it (Archaeology of Knowledge, 209).

In other words, we need to acknowledge that students and teachers, as well as theories and practices, all reside in relations of social power which determine how speech or writing circulates; i.e. who reads it and what they do about it: act on it, ignore it, file it, grade it, or throw it away. Thus, until writing teachers recognize that they cannot develop personal confidence in a context that strips students of social authority, students will not "own" their writing; instead, they will acknowledge the real owners with that frustrating question: "what do you want me to write?"

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